
1. The Five Stages of Grief

*Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression,
and Acceptance*

The stages have evolved since their introduction, and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives.

The five stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order.

Our hope is that with these stages comes the knowledge of grief's terrain, making us better equipped to cope with life and loss.

DENIAL

Denial in grief has been misinterpreted over the years. When the stage of denial was first introduced in *On Death and Dying*, it focused on the person who was dying. In this book, *On Grief and Grieving*, the person who may be in denial is grieving the loss of a loved one. In a person who is dying, denial may look like disbelief. They may be going about life and actually denying that a terminal illness exists. For a person who has lost a loved one, however, the denial is more symbolic than literal.

This does not mean that you literally don't know your loved one has died. It means you come home and you can't believe that your wife isn't going to walk in the door at any minute or that your husband isn't just away on a business trip. You simply can't fathom that he will never walk through that door again.

When we are in denial, we may respond at first by being paralyzed with shock or blanketed with numbness. The denial is still not *denial of the actual death*, even though someone may be saying, "I can't believe he's dead." The person is actually saying that, at first, because it is too much for his or her psyche.

Alicia was accustomed to Matthew's being away on business

Alicia was accustomed to Matthew's being away on business trips. His work required him to travel the world, and Alicia had accompanied him on several trips that took him to places she wanted to see. She also witnessed the jet lag, hectic schedule, time changes, and delayed flights.

On his current trip, Alicia was surprised that he'd been scheduled to arrive in Delhi and he hadn't phoned her yet. After two days, he called and apologized, explaining that there were phone problems in his hotel. She understood because this often happened when he traveled to third world countries.

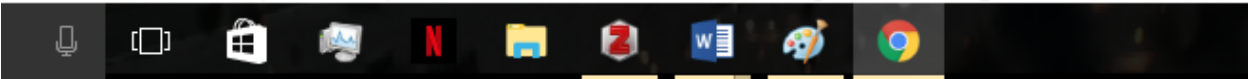
ON GRIEF AND GRIEVING

The next call came two days later in the middle of the night from one of her husband's coworkers. He gently told her that he had very bad news. Matthew had been killed in a car accident. He said there were very few details as yet but the home office would be contacting her.

the front of the line as feelings of sadness, panic, hurt, and loneliness also appear, stronger than ever. Loved ones and friends are often taken aback by these feelings, because they surface just as you were beginning to function at a basic level again.

You may also be angry with yourself that you couldn't *stop* it from happening. Not that you had the power, but you had the will. The will to save a life is not the power to stop a death. But most of all, you may be angry at this unexpected, undeserved, and unwanted situation in which you find yourself. Someone once shared, "I'm angry that I have to keep living in a world where I can't find her, call her, or see her. I can't find the person I loved or needed anywhere. She is not really where her body is now. The heavenly bodies elude me. The all-ness or one-ness of her spiritual existence escapes me. I am lost and full of rage."

Anger is a necessary stage of the healing process. Be willing to feel your anger, even though it may seem endless. The more you truly feel it, the more it will begin to dissipate and



the more you will heal. There are many other emotions under the anger and you will get to them in time, but anger is the emotion we are most used to managing. We often choose it to avoid the feelings underneath until we are ready to face them. It may feel all-consuming, but as long as it doesn't consume you for a long period of time, it is part of your emotional management. It is a useful emotion until you've moved past the first waves of it. Then you will be ready to go deeper. In the process of grief and grieving you will have many subsequent visits with anger in its many forms.

The truth is that anger has no limits. It can extend not only to your friends, the doctors, your family, yourself, and your loved one who died, but also to God. You may ask, "Where is God in this? Where is his love? His powerfulness? His compassion? Is this really God's will?" You may not want people to talk to you about God's plan or his mysteries. You may feel like saying, "God, my husband has died. Was this your plan?" Or "I don't want any mysteries, I just want him back. My faith feels rocked and destroyed." "I feel not given to but taken from." "God is a disappointment, and my faith feels shattered with his plan for me and my loved one."

BARGAINING

Before a loss, it seems you will do anything if only your loved one may be spared. "Please, God," you bargain, "I will never be angry at my wife again if you'll just let her live." After a loss, bargaining may take the form of a temporary truce. "What if I devote the rest of my life to helping others? Then can I wake up and realize this has all been a bad dream?"

We become lost in a maze of "if only . . ." or "What if . . ." statements. We want life returned to what it was; we want our loved one restored. We want to go back in time: find the tumor sooner, recognize the illness more quickly, stop the accident from happening . . . if only, if only, if only.

Guilt is often bargaining's companion. The "if onlys" cause us to find fault with ourselves and what we "think" we could have done differently. We may even bargain with the pain. We will do anything not to feel the pain of this loss. We remain in the past, trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt.

As Howard turned seventy-five, he was determined to keep himself and his sixty-six-year-old wife, Millie, in good health. He had read somewhere that walking every day would keep them fit, possibly ward off Alzheimers, and help them sleep better. Millie knew it was easier to go along with the program than to resist.

On the sixth day, after they returned from a busy morning of errands, Howard got ready for their walk. Millie looked at Howard and said, "Do we have to do this every day? A day off won't hurt."

The reality is that your grief is there and available for processing, on or off medication. Some people feel that medications simply put a floor in for them to deal with their depression. In some cases, depression may need to be managed by using a combination of support, psychotherapy, and antidepressant medications.

As difficult as it is to endure, depression has elements that can be helpful in grief. It slows us down and allows us to take real stock of the loss. It makes us rebuild ourselves from the ground up. It clears the deck for growth. It takes us to a deeper place in our soul that we would not normally explore.

Most people's initial reaction to sad people is to try to cheer them up, to tell them not to look at things so grimly, to look at the bright side of life. This cheering-up reaction is often an expression of that person's own needs and that person's own inability to tolerate a long face over an extended period. A mourner should be allowed to experience his sorrow, and he will be grateful for those who can sit with him without telling him not to be sad. A mourner may be in the midst of life and yet not a participant in all the activities considered living; unable to get out of bed; tense, irritable, unable to concentrate; unable to care about anything. No matter what our surroundings may hold, we feel alone. This is what hitting the bottom feels like. You wonder if you will ever feel anything again or if this is what life will be like forever.

ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is often confused with the notion of being all right or okay with what has happened. This is not the case. Most people don't ever feel okay or all right about the loss of a loved one. This

ON GRIEF AND GRIEVING

stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent reality. We will never like this reality or make it okay, but eventually we accept it. We learn to live with it. It is the new norm with which we must learn to live. This is where our final healing and adjustment can take a firm hold, despite the fact that healing often looks and feels like an unattainable state.

Healing looks like remembering, recollecting, and reorganizing. We may cease to be angry with God; we may become aware of the commonsense reasons for our loss, even if we never actually understand the reasons. We the survivors begin to realize sadly that it was our loved one's time to die. Of course it was too soon for us, and probably too soon for him or her, too. Perhaps he was very old or full of pain and disease. Perhaps her body was worn down and she was ready for her journey to be over. But *our* journey still continues. It is not yet time for us to die; in fact, it is time for us to heal.

We must try to live now in a world where our loved one is missing. In resisting this new norm, at first we may want to maintain life as it was before a loved one died. In time, through bits and pieces of acceptance, however, we see that we cannot maintain the past intact. It has been forever changed and we must readjust. We must learn to reorganize roles, reassign them to others or take them on ourselves. The more of your identity that was connected to your loved one, the harder it will be to do this.

As we heal, we learn who we are and who our loved one was in life. In a strange way, as we move through grief, healing brings us closer to the person we loved. A new relationship begins. We learn to live with the loved one we lost. We start the process of reintegration, trying to put back the pieces that have been ripped away.